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EARLY LIFE IN SOUTHERN WISCONSIN

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In writing a paper on the phases of a new life in a new land one suddenly becomes convinced of the truth of an old saying, that "many of the ills of life go where the white man goes, and stay where he stays." Forty years ago one never saw a crow in Wisconsin, and yet within but a year the supervisors of Rock County passed an ordinance to pay ten cents for each crow killed. In the fall of 1849 I rode eight miles, at the request of a doctor, to find a weed which he needed for one of his patients, a weed which covers the state today. The first dandelion in this region was brought the same year from Lexington, Kentucky, and planted in a garden in Section No. 9 of Porter, for table use. The Indian papoose was never stung by a honeybee until the white man brought this maker of sweets to his country. But it was not all ill which the white man brought. The Fourth of July and picnics came with him, too. The Puritans tried to banish Christmas, but Thanksgiving, at first, and afterwards the Fourth of July they originated and handed down to the whole nation. The Saints' days do not receive a cordial welcome. So the Fourth of July and the picnic came to northern Rock.

Among the curious new sights which came to the eyes of your fathers was the annual autumnal migration of the Indians (Winnebago) from their reservation in the north to the lakes at Madison, and thence down the Catfish River to its mouth in the Rock, thence up the Rock to Lake Koshkonong, for their yearly supply of wild rice. Their trail usually followed the river until it struck the northwest corner of the south half of Section No. 13 of Porter, thence direct to the Indian Garden where the Catfish empties into the Rock. Of those Indians who came in canoes, the women and

children almost always camped on Section 13, and then it was that white husbands saw the primitive and proper condition of mankind. No sooner had they paddled their canoes ashore than the women took the hatchets and began to build the tepee—wigwam we called it. They cut down the poles and planted them in the ground and covered them with matting, while the braves, their lords, seated themselves on the ground to smoke, to talk—say politics—and fix their traps. No one of us white men ever found our wives or sisters allowing us to do that. The wigwam put up, the begging began. Every family received a visit from one of the women. Everything eatable was asked for: pork, flour, potatoes, butter and bread, and all were thrown into their blankets, a motley mass. The blanket probably had once been white, but soon took on the color of the wearer. One visit of the wives of these “noble red men” and all romance of Indian life was gone. The strongest imagination could never conjure up a Hiawatha, or even an old Nokomis. These parties came down the river all through the fifties and sixties, but the fast coming settlements of the white man and the failure of the wild rice in the lake put a stop to them.

Rock County is today what the women and men of the forties and fifties made it. You who see it now dotted with pleasant houses and profitable farms can not see it as it was sixty years ago, a great sweeping, undulating plain of rich prairie land covered with the richest flowers, relieved with trees along the river banks and in groves to give variety to the picture. Today you see it as man has transformed the beautiful, bounteous, unprofitable nature into money-making houses and fields and smoking factories. Today you meet with a public opinion which governs your houses, your farms, your social manners, your eating and drinking, even your dress, and everything which joins you to the world of your fellow men. Mrs. Grundy has come in. Then every man who came here was a law unto himself. He brought his old

habits and manners—habits and manners as different from the other few incomers as the eastern society from which he came differed. Everyone fenced his part of the section, plowed his fields, and built himself a shanty without regard to the ideas of his far-off neighbor, but always with due regard to the few dollars in his purse. Even his few farm animals wandered where they saw fit.

Every newcomer was a neighbor to everyone within miles of his home. There was plenty of work to do, few to do it, and everyone gave what he could to help. Those of you—I am not talking to the ladies now—those of you who have broken your acres during the last thirty years with three or four horses and a narrow breaking plow can scarcely understand the slow process of breaking land with six yoke of oxen and a thirty-inch plow. I wish you could have seen the long string of droning cattle—the biggest one always the leader and always called “Baby.” But they broke our ground and fitted it for the wheat that was sure to follow. Everyone raised wheat, and little else. How did we manage to live through some of those years? The first crop of wheat I raised I sent to Milwaukee—that was the only market—and sold it at forty-five cents a bushel and paid twenty-five cents to the man who hauled it. It netted me twenty cents per bushel. I am glad I was not married then. After I had been here two or three years notice was given that a new machine, a reaper, was to begin to cut the wheat on a neighboring farm. As a matter of course we all turned out to see the sight—four horses before the reaper, in appearance like the early McCormick, but the machine dropped the unbound sheaves right in the track of the horses. There were not binders enough, so the onlookers had to turn in and bind so that the machine could make the second round. It was a failure. And then came the McCormick, the first one, one with the reel driven by a belt. Oh, how arms and backs ached raking off that heavy grain: two men on the reaper, five men binding, and

two men setting up in shocks. Nine men day in and day out, week after week, for our wives—those glorious women—to cook for. You ladies of today, who have your well-appointed houses to look after, may know whether your mothers were worthy of the worshipful love of their husbands. And then the necessary food for all these men. The hot saleratus biscuit and dried apples. How constant they were. Beef $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound by the quarter; 10 cents for a chicken, big or little; 5 cents a dozen for eggs; $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents for dressed pork; butter—every housewife made her own. I can remember no price for it. Every farmer raised his own flour, although some drove from fifty to seventy miles to Fulton to the mill to grind their wheat, until Beloit and Stoughton started their mills.

But the women of that day—how did they live such work-a-day lives? I know they took their hours of rest. One day in April of 1850 I was drawing logs to the sawmill in Fulton. The snow was six inches deep and had been lying for two days on the ground, with mud two or three inches deep under it. I was using a pair of bobs, no box on it. As I passed through the village, on the brightest of bright days, I saw several ladies at one of the houses at an afternoon party: young married ladies as full of fun as any young girl needs to be. One of them hailed me, saying, “Won’t you give us a sleigh ride?” They could not be refused. Six or eight of them came out and somehow seated themselves on the runners, among them the only woman in the region who had money, the wife of the proprietor of the village. He had made four thousand dollars in his mill during the winter. The wife, as in duty bound, had gone to Milwaukee and bought a rich black velvet mantilla. I venture to say no such thing had been seen in Rock County before. Arrayed in this rich costume she seated herself on one of the crossbars of the runners. The ride was perhaps a mile through the snow and slush, the women laughing at the fun, as a true woman has a

right to laugh. At the end, say of a mile, I turned around and thoughtlessly struck the horses slightly with the whip. Oh, what screams! "Stop! Stop!" The horses stopped, and looking about there sat the velvet mantilla with the owner in it, in six inches of snow and slush. Was there ever such a shamefaced driver? With no fault of his own, he knew that that rich velvet mantilla could never look fresh and unsoiled again. But the women had the fun. All the more so because of the constant work of those days.

The young girls, where were they? I have been trying to count them. I can remember but nine in a circle, the diameter of which is fifteen miles. I do not think I have missed anyone. I am not practiced in passing the girls by. One of them you have in your town now; one who carried joy and brightness to all within her reach. Permit an old man to bring the tribute of his respect and lay it at the feet of one whose young maidenhood threw so much sunshine over the dreariness of a new country.

When I came to this beautiful land I had a wholesome fear of two things: fever and ague, and rattlesnakes. You can imagine that my anxiety in regard to the ague was not allayed when I was told at my first call upon a neighbor that "this was the healthiest place he had ever lived in; there had not been an ague in that house for two weeks." But fifty years have come and gone, and the dreaded disease has not made its appearance yet. As for the snakes, not one was seen for three months. One evening in the early gloaming, in crossing the bridge at Stebbinsville, a peculiar sound was heard, a sound which once heard is never forgotten. I stopped and listened, and walked back and forth to see what made it. As I passed a certain point of the bridge, it grew louder and more constant. I fixed the point, and on looking over the railing, saw coiled up on a brace a miserable little snake, say fifteen inches long, rattling his threats at me with a snake's venom. A little blow of a stick ended his threats, and fear of rattlesnakes vanished.

The first Thanksgiving in Rock County ought ever to be remembered. Nelson Dewey was the first governor of the state. He was not supposed to be a religious man, and allowed his first year (1848) to go by without a Thanksgiving. In his second year the month of November came, and no proclamation. There lived in Janesville a constable named Martin Dewey, and in the middle of the month the *Janesville Gazette* published a proclamation of a Thanksgiving signed "M. Dewey." Everyone supposed that the printer had made a mistake in the letter "M" so the good people made preparations and celebrated the first Thanksgiving in the county. The day was just past, when the Governor, ashamed as was thought, issued a genuine proclamation, signed "N. Dewey," and fixed another day, and so we had two Thanksgivings, I think within a week of each other. We did not have the turkey, nor the mince pies, but we did have pumpkin pies, and as good a dinner as you can have nowadays.

But to come to more serious reminiscences, Rock County in the late fifties and early sixties had supported Mr. Lincoln for the presidency, had seen him elected, and knew that he was inaugurated into his office. Then it heard like a sudden, awful peal of thunder the cannon at Fort Sumter. It had but one thought, one desire—to hasten to defend the Union. Our county needed no inducement to rally to Mr. Lincoln's call to arms. The county's quota of men was on hand. Public meetings were held in every township. In the town of Porter the remembrance is very vivid with me of how one of the most prominent Democrats stepped forward with the strongest resolutions in the support of Mr. Lincoln, whom a little while before he had warmly opposed. Need I tell you that that very man advocated the levying of two taxes each year in that town, which was done, rather than run into debt in securing the money which was needed? Need I tell you how the price of every necessity of life was doubled,

quadrupled? No one murmured. It was the price of our Union and had to be paid. The balance was not always on the wrong side of the sheet, either. A neighbor sold thirty hogs for \$900—thirteen cents a pound—and they averaged less than two hundred fifty pounds in weight. You ought to have seen the presents which that man brought to the Christmas tree in Fulton church.

In the time of the war one man, known to you older citizens, bought a piece of land. The wife of the seller declared that she would not sign the deed unless the buyer gave her a dress. An old custom was that a married woman need not sign a deed for her husband's land unless the purchaser gave her a silk dress. In this case the buyer went to Janesville and bought the dress, paying almost as much as a common silk would cost today. When the woman opened the bundle she found twelve or fourteen yards of bed ticking. She was satisfied and signed the deed.

The soldiers went out from us bright and joyful, but oh, the heart-breaking groans of the mothers and wives of those who never returned. The remembrance of them is in every cemetery, and you see the memorial flags there on every Memorial Day.

One of these boys—he was a mere boy from Fulton Sunday School—enlisted and after a long service was with General Thomas in the battle of Nashville. His health was badly shattered, and when the battle began he was told by his officer to go to the rear. But no; all the first day, and at night he was repeatedly advised to keep to the rear; he refused and was in the fight all the next day until Hood was driven back and our troops shouted for victory. Then and only then did Alonzo Sutton give up the fight, and was sent home to die in our midst.

In conclusion I wish to say that I have never seen any other county save one which I would exchange for this. And that one is Chester County, Pennsylvania, where those Dutch

farmers have piled up two hundred years of wealth. When our children shall have seen two hundred years of service here they will not even wish to go to that beautiful Dutch county.

If I could call before you now the men and women of fifty or sixty years ago, you think you would cry out, "What dreary, heavy-worked lives they must have lived." Do you think so? Their lives were as full of joy and healthy experiences as you fair women enjoy today. When you look out of your windows any day and see the earth all aglow with sunshine your hearts are lifted up. Those fathers and mothers of yours were looking forward to prospects as bright as the sunshine on your fields. They came from the work of eastern homes, which were stationary and gave them no promise of any future; they came to homes here, bringing brighter days, more light, more sunshine, and drawing them more and more into touch with the world around them. They fought a brave fight and victory was their reward.